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Miscellany

Benefits of forests, direct and indirect Forests are known to provide a wide range of benefits including provisioning, regulatory, cultural and supporting services. *Last updated: 01 February, 2010*

They provide food, fodder, fuelwood, timber, manure, and medicinal products. Forests also absorb rain water and release it slowly, allowing seepage into the soil, preventing its run-off with water.

This slow release of water helps the soil moisture, surface flows, and irrigation in the valleys. Most of these services go unnoticed, leave alone being priced or marketed and hence not perceived as benefits per se. This seems to be true in the case of farmers in the command area of river Gundal that originates from Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple wildlife sanctuary in Chamarajnagar district of Karnataka, where canal irrigation as in many similar cases, is dependent on a forested catchment.

Canal irrigation brought with it noticeable change in land use systems, cropping pattern and cropping intensity in Gundal. Farmers downstream, who used to grow rain-fed crops like ragi, maize, horsegram, groundnut and minor millets using the slowly moistened soils of the valley, turned to paddy and sugarcane flooding their fields from canal water. Thus these communities started deriving more provisioning services from the upstream forests of the sanctuary, though agro diversity and diet patterns have taken a toll.

Thus, farmers in the command area reap an average monetary gain (in the form of food grains, fodder and grazing) of Rs 11,673 per acre, at 2008 prices. This is Rs 8,667 more than that from rain-fed farms in the area. Apart from this market benefit from irrigation, they also recognise augmented water levels in open wells and bore wells used for potable water, other domestic uses and livestock. These benefits are despite in complete realisation of benefits from canal irrigation due to factors like poor credit facilities, issues in water sharing, inefficient Water Users' Associations, and poor maintenance of canals.

Though direct benefits attributable to the forested sanctuary appear considerable, it does not make farmers acknowledge the source of this value. They associate the utility of upstream forests only with supply of wood and non wood products for forest dependent communities.

A reason for a thankless delink between variety of benefits reaped and forested catchments could be a conspicuous ambiguity on the inter connections between canal water and the forests especially in the long-run. This is interesting as many acknowledge the role played by forests in the water flow of a free river, but tend to ignore the same for water stored in the reservoir. How crucial is a protected catchment for sustained water flow to the fields in the command and how beneficial is it to avoid a reduction in storage capacity of the dam are not clarified to the beneficiaries. So are the facts on ecological cost of submergence and social cost of rehabilitation or the need for judicious use of water for a locally appropriate cropping pattern.

People in Gundal command perceive provisioning services from the upstream forests (like timber, fodder, fuel wood, and other forest produces) better than regulatory or support functions of these forests that have direct impact on their livelihood. As the former set of provisioning services do not accrue to downstream farmers, this does not fuel discussions on preventing catchment degradation. Making the unseen linkages explicit to these farming communities in the command areas may generate participation in preventing catchment degradation. Seema Purushothaman and Seema Hegde (ATREE)



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